

Context and Meaning: A Semiotic Interpretation of Greetings in Hausa

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The empiricist...thinks he believes only what he sees, but he is much better at believing than at seeing. (Santayana 1923:201)

The semiotic expression of respect in Hausa is the main concern of this paper. I focus on greetings from the region of Maradi in the West African republic of Niger for the practical reason that I was born and raised there, but reference to other Hausa regions will be made as necessary in order to give a different perspective to the reader; this comparison will also reflect the diversity of Hausa social life. I will avoid generalizations except in cases where I am positive that the practice is widespread across Hausaland.

In looking at Hausa expressions of respect in the context of social greetings, from a semiotic perspective, I will apply a critical semiotic approach to the sociolinguistic and folkloric perspectives which stipulate that seeing-is-understanding. By determining the accuracy and reliability of the act of seeing, a critique of such perspectives will develop. I will evaluate these social interactions in semiotic terms, basing my analysis on the idea that any two persons interacting are like a social text or sign for the viewer to read and interpret (Tejera 1995).

When an oral performer and his or her audience share the same social background and physical space, they tend to have in common a linguistic and cultural competence which enables the audience, as viewers and listeners, to figure out the meanings of allusions and fill in what Paul Zumthor (1990) calls the “unsaid,” the semantic vacancies characteristic of oral performances. If the song, poem, tale, or other text is collected, transcribed, translated, and published in a book or other written text by an anthropologist or ethnographer, then additional explanation is required to assist the distant reader in understanding the “unsaid.” In other words, the ethnographer has to wrestle with this question: what happens when an oral poem, tale, or other cultural manifestation, such as greetings, is taken out of context and fixed in writing for a foreign audience?

This question even arises when the performance is in front of a predominantly foreign audience. In the Hausa context, for instance, many ethnic groups in Niger have become “Hausanized” to a certain level; people from these ethnic groups speak and understand Hausa in their own way in addition to their own first language(s). Since they maintain their cultural and linguistic identity, however, the new culture they live by is a mixture of their own heritage and the Hausa influence by way of the Hausa culture and language. Thus a native Hausa oral artist from Maradi or Zinder (southeastern Niger) can perform for audiences in Filingu or Gaya, both in western Niger with a diaspora of Hausa speakers; yet there may still be some cultural allusions or ambiguities that the audiences are not able to apprehend because many of them speak Hausa as a second or third language.

While the meaning of an oral poem, tale, or greeting may be clear for an audience that shares a similar background with the performer, it may be opaque or foreign to other audiences. This makes descriptive interpretation a necessary component in any ethnographic endeavor. The break between the original context of performance and the new moment of reception calls for what Elizabeth Fine (1984) names an interpreter, that is, a critic. The critic’s task is to generate clear meanings for the readers who may not be able to understand some allusions of the performance. As a critic, I intend to bridge that linguistic, cultural, and geographical gap by using my competence as a Hausa native speaker to provide the “unsaid,” and to fill out the semantic vacancies through a critical use of the semiotic interpretation of greetings and spatial distance in the Hausa epistemological space in Niger. I will begin with a review of the sociolinguistic approach to the topic as developed by Ahmed B. Yusuf, a Hausa scholar from Nigeria.

The Sociolinguistic Approach of Ahmed B. Yusuf

In his sociolinguistic studies of Hausa honorifics and modes of address, Yusuf (1973, 1979) has examined how various degrees of politeness and intimacy are expressed in Hausa social life. He has found that while some deferential terms of address are obligatory, such as when children address their parents *baba* (father) and *mamma* (mother), others are less rigid, indicating degrees of formality or intimacy between the persons involved. For example, when proper names are exchanged freely, Yusuf claims that “it is always assumed that they (the parties involved) either have similar social backgrounds or else lead similar styles of life” (1973:227).

Yusuf also has found that age, seniority, or status are indicated with deference. The junior, or what some call the “inferior,” participant will address the “superior” with the appropriate term according to the circumstances. In this respect, Yusuf remarks that the terms *mai gida* (the male, literally, owner

of the house, or the head of the household), *uwal gida* (literally, the mother of the household), and *Alhaji/Hajiya* (he/she who has performed the pilgrimage to Mecca) are applied to people who are responsible and dependable. Furthermore, the terms *Alhaji* and *Hajiya* convey the notions that the person referred to has sophisticated commercial skills and has traveled widely. However in contemporary usage, the term *mai gida* is usually confined to rural areas. In urban centers this form of address is used if it is suspected that the addressee is from a rural setting. *Mallam/Mallama* (the Muslim learned man/woman) also connotes Islamic piety and supernatural feats as opposed to *ranka ya da'de* or *ranki ya da'de* (may God give you a long life, for a man and for a woman, respectively), which signifies a "detached secular and sacred authority" (Yusuf 1973:229). According to Yusuf, this secular title of authority was originally associated with the pre-Islamic rulers of the Hausaland.

Honorifics, respect, and other semiotic signs are used here to carry out an interpretation of social texts. Some of these honorifics, however, have gone through a transition with the introduction of Islam that Yusuf does not indicate. For example, the honorific *ranka ya da'de* underwent a transformation that has given birth to the expressions *Allah ya biya* (literally, may God pay (you), meaning may God grant your wishes) and *Allah ya ba ka nasara* (may God give you victory). The Muslim Allah has replaced the traditional rulers who in many instances incarnated the traditional beliefs or religions. The transformation of the honorific, therefore, clearly indicates the influence of the new religion as well as the decline of the old beliefs and traditional authority. Thus in the region of Maradi, the new expression has become *Allah ya biya Maradi* (may God grant Maradi (a royal title) his wishes); local legend says that Maradi is the name of the founder of the city Maradi which has become an official title in the King's Palace.

There are additional usages that Yusuf does not indicate. For example, the term *Mallam* or *Mallama* is used in the sense of the American "Sir" or "Madam." In this case it loses its religious connotation and is simply a title of respect used when addressing someone unfamiliar. *Mallam* or *Mallama*, therefore, can be used to address those who know nothing about Islam. The same is now true of the term *Alhaji* or *Hajiya*; today one does not have to have undergone the pilgrimage to Mecca to be addressed with this term. Even those pilgrims who have not necessarily lived like saints are addressed using these terms.

In addition, prestige and deference are indicated by symbols such as greetings by a handshake, a salute, or a deep bow, and a wide range of other deferential behaviors, including not speaking until spoken to, removing one's shoes when entering a room, and running errands for a superior (Yusuf 1973). In any of these cases the so-called "inferior" participant expects some

rewards. This is because, as Yusuf has explained, the entire system of address depends upon give and take, as is clearly underlined by the Hausa maxim "he who does not respect another person's senior risks having his own ill-received elsewhere" (quoted in Yusuf 1973: 229). This means that the reward for treating others with respect is not necessarily material or monetary, but rather in receiving similar respect from others.

Yusuf points out that there are instances where the terms of address such as *ranka ya da'de* indicate not only respect and formality, but also distance. He states that the Hausa occasionally use terms of address on purpose to express courteous indignation, impatience, sarcasm, hatred, and other sentiments when a person would not readily accord the familiarity that a direct insult would connote.

Finally, Yusuf points to the fact that as changes are under way, some of these terms of address are becoming obsolete. Such is the case with the term *Mallam*, which is now used less than *Alhaji*. The latter is in turn being over-used, a sign, according to Yusuf, that it is losing some of its social prestige as well. In conclusion, Yusuf predicts that in the face of Western influence and democracy, the importance of the Hausa honorifics and other terms of address is likely to decline.¹

A Critical Application of the Semiotic Approach

Before bridging the "unsaid" in the specific context of Hausa gestures, I will explain what such an approach should add to the ethnographic process and suggest why it has often been lacking. A number of sociolinguistic approaches rely more on language than on specific events in their contexts. The problem with many of these approaches, therefore, is that they are influenced by structural anthropology for which "understanding is seeing...other societies from a height, at such a distance that the people seem like ants" (Salmond 1982:73). From such a distance it is difficult for anyone to give an accurate description of events. At best, one can gain a general view but a view that lacks significant details, the absence of which may compromise the credibility of that particular anthropological enterprise. This is what Kay Milton suggests in stating that "if meaning depends on context then the analyst's ability to infer meaning depends on his identification of the appropriate context" (1982:261). In other words, seeing is not enough for understanding. The anthropologist or sociologist must come closer to the actors within their context.

There has been a strong belief, says folklorist Alan Dundes (1972), among American anthropologists for whom seeing is everything, that to see is enough to make one believe and understand. In his article "Seeing Is Believing," Dundes argues that in general Americans tend to see the world metaphorically rather than hear, touch, smell, or taste it. Dundes thinks that

this metaphorical “seeing” explains why many American anthropologists cherish the idea of taking photographs, indicating their emphasis on seeing something for oneself along with the tendency to distrust anyone else’s report of a given event: “‘I saw it with my own (two) eyes’ is a common authenticating formula, as is the invitation to ‘see for yourself’” (1972:10). Dundes emphasizes that this perspective’s cultural bias is evident in some anthropological interpretations, a point also made by Paul Stoller (1989). Dundes thus warns that, “If we are truly interested in understanding how other peoples perceive reality, we must recognize their cognitive categories and try to escape the confines of our own” (1972:86).

An approach that does not overcome this bias tends to neglect the actors and the context, which are necessary to the interpretation of semiotic signs/texts, in favor of the gatherer who has taken the role of the producer of meaning and culture. That is indeed what Anne Salmond implies when she writes that “intellectual work is above all a process of production...and...the structural characteristics of Western production should apply to the production of knowledge as well” (1982:77). Certainly there is no great harm in comparative studies as long as they are held in a standard of intellectual honesty and detachment.

But there is room for doubt when one is aware of the nature of some Western theories, such as semiotic or semantic approaches vis-a-vis the “Third World” literatures and cultures. Whether it is about oral or written literary criticism, most of these theories have been more concerned with the imposition of their cultural models (see also Stoller 1989). As a result, their interrogative power, as Niyi Osundare (1994) has put it, has been severely selective and often ethnocentric (see also Lapid 1996; Frazier 1995; Irele 1995; Yankah 1995; Koné 1993; Bishop 1988).

It is true that one cannot be totally free of one’s cultural background as one writes about or interprets something. But to allow cultural prejudices and idiosyncrasies to take over one’s intellectual capacity to evaluate is very dangerous, to say the least. For example, Michael Riffaterre’s (1978) formalist and structural approach tends to sever the text or sign from its context, as I have argued elsewhere (Oumarou 1994). This is an approach to be avoided in any viable social and cultural semiotic model.

Analysis of Greetings in the Hausa Context

Informed by Dundes’s work, I now turn to a critical semiotic interpretation of Hausa social greetings in Maradi, illustrating the problems inherent in the common perspectives that stipulate seeing-is-understanding. Habib Ahmed Daba (1987) has shown the importance of age in the Hausa social stratification system and its influence on individual members. As a

result, the general hypothesis held by readers of his work is that younger persons show respect to older ones. One way of showing this respect is through greetings, whose forms vary according to regions and education, as I will detail later.

To this effect, I can imagine the amazement of the foreign social scientist armed with the seeing-is-understanding theory, when an older person squats or bows deeply to greet a younger one as a sign of respect. How will the viewer-interpreter deal with the case? For a native Hausa the explanation may not be hard to find. But what of the viewer who is a foreigner working as an anthropologist or as an ethnologist? How can this person read such a semiotic sign and interpret it in light of the seeing-is-believing theory, without assistance from the culture's participants? I think, without such assistance, the researcher is likely to dismiss the event as an exception to the rule. In another example, there is a different sign in the form of an old person squatting or bowing deeply to greet another old person. Again, there is a break from the expected and, as a result, a non-informed viewer may be misled. However, in these last two examples only the codes or signs are different, while the aim is still to show respect. In the first instance the younger person may just have the name of the mother or father of the older person; so that by greeting the normally "inferior," the older person is actually showing respect to the memory of his/her parents. In the second instance power or status may be involved so that the one who bows or squats is of "lower" (I use this term for want of a better one) status, no matter his/her age. While a wealthier commoner may squat or bow to greet a poorer chief to preserve the latter's honor and authority, it is, to my knowledge, difficult to find a very old person squatting to greet a young chief, but it is still a possibility.

Another way of showing respect is to take off one's shoes before approaching the person to be greeted. But this practice happens only at very limited and often fixed places. For instance, a person may do this when passing in front of a chief's palace or in front of any place where he/she expects to find respectable people. Now more often found in the countryside than in cities and towns, it is a dying practice. This is due to the uncomfortable position in which it often puts the people involved, due to the use of modern shoes, which require more time to remove.

For example, I remember an incident in which I was a participant. Some friends and I were invited to a lunch at our ambassador's residence in a foreign country. The first person to enter the reception room easily managed to take off his shoes, but mine needed a long time to remove and there were other people behind me. Because the ambassador was waiting to welcome us, I made a quick decision. I entered with my shoes on and the others followed suit. The ambassador did not seem to have noticed, but I felt uncomfortable and I think the others did as well; I blamed our friend for his orthodox behavior.

In cases such as this incident at the ambassador's residence, signs are not sufficient to provide meaning. A foreign researcher is likely to miss the meaning of social behavior as described in this incident if he/she believes in seeing-is-believing theory alone. It follows that the seeing-is-believing approach does not do full justice to the sociolinguistic and anthropological theories that are built on them. This is because the whole purpose of anthropological or sociolinguistic studies is to reach the essence of other people's culture through the studies of their different forms of language, an approach that has given birth to semiotics. In this case it is not only a matter of gathering "wild" facts to "domesticate" them, as Salmond has put it (1982:77).

In terms of social semiotics, handshaking is a very important social text for the analysis of the Hausa greetings. However, it may be misleading depending on the context, region, or education of those involved. In rural areas, handshaking, as a form of greeting, occurs mostly among people of equal rank or age. People living in small villages or communities hardly shake hands as a form of greeting. The only exception is when they meet at mosques after prayers; at this time, handshaking is made as a gesture of togetherness or brotherhood in accordance with the Islamic ideal of peace. It also happens in ceremonial circumstances, for example, after a naming ceremony.

With these exceptions excluded, many villagers behave or greet each other in a way similar to the American *hi* or *hello*. In the Hausa language such greetings translate as *sannu* or *barka*. Yet to express concern for the health of the family or for something else, the greeting in Hausa society may be extended, taking a longer time, and giving a higher dose of human warmth and concern. Thus instead of just *sannu*, one may add *ina kwana* (how was the night-sleep or good morning). The latter can also be expressed as *barka da asuba*. It is important to note that greetings occurring in rural areas tend to take a longer time than they normally do in urban settings, except when urbanites use them to keep conversations going.

It follows that when men finally shake their hands in rural areas, it is almost certain that one of the parties involved is a "stranger," someone from another village who has the same status or age. When age or status differs, it is more likely that the one who is younger or "lower" in rank will squat or bow to greet the other. This also applies to women except that they do not shake hands among themselves or with men because of Islamic and local traditions.

In urban areas the situation is different in many respects. Most noticeably, squatting occurs less frequently. Instead, people shake hands, sometimes despite age or gender. This is where education becomes a determinant factor. Those who have a Western schooling, even if in addition to an Islamic or other traditional education, are likely to shake hands. This may occur between women and men, and between old and young regardless of age differences.

However, the case is not that simple because of Islam's influence which is more marked in some regions than in others. As a result, in most cases where Islamic values are predominant, married women do not shake hands with men except, occasionally, at their work places. Yet handshaking is very frequent among unmarried people of all ages and sexes. Now the question is how can one understand, from a semiotic point of view, who respects whom and how? How can a photograph of this social text explain the complexity of the situation to someone in America, for example? In other words, how can seeing become understanding or believing in this complex situation?

One further complication is that whether in cities or villages, these formalities are less applied in households. It is true that in villages sons and daughters are expected to greet their parents if they live in the same compound. The morning greeting is usually the most practiced. In some village contexts even wives are expected to greet their husbands in the morning in conformity with the Islamic tradition.

In cities, age matters less than status, which usually involves money or power, and greetings vary more according to the situation. For instance, if an employee shakes hands with his or her employer at a naming ceremony, then respect is shown by either bowing a little bit or by holding the hand that is being shaken by the employer. There are also other ways to show respect that depend on context and the kind of relationship between the two persons involved. The issue of who initiates the greetings is also complex. It may depend on the context and it may express the extent to which the people involved hold each other in esteem. In practice, however, anybody can initiate a greeting. A professor or teacher, for example, may initiate the greetings if he/she holds a student in high esteem. It is a way of encouraging the student and giving him/her an opportunity to approach the instructor for help. Similarly, an old person may greet a younger person first after having known him/her for a while and after having established that the younger is a respecting and respectable person. In other words, such an act signifies that the younger has qualities of a respectable and reliable person. As the well-known Chinua Achebe has said, when a boy washes his hands, he can eat with kings.

In the Hausa social context, these qualities of a young person also confirm the idea expressed by M. G. Smith (1957) that achievement is very important and it may take precedence over age. An individual of humble origin who has become rich through hard work may be accorded, due to their personal achievement, higher status than a person of royal origin who is not considered rich enough to command respect. A poor chief or prince in modern Hausa society is no match for a very rich commoner.

More recently, a new middle class of merchants, intellectuals, government civil servants, and those in liberal professions has emerged. As a result, the societal situation is showing a reversal in status, moving from the old ruling groups to the newly emergent bourgeoisie class. Address terms

such as *ranka ya da'de*, that formerly applied to the ruling class, are now used to greet members of the emergent bourgeois group. Such transformations make it very difficult for a distant observer to grasp the reality of the changing Hausa social life from a semiotic perspective, as neither snapshots nor data gathered at random can fully give an accurate idea of the changes.

Furthermore, there are situations where greetings and respect are manifested by spatial distance. Because of Islam, close physical contact is prohibited between men and women except when they are married or in exceptional circumstances. So in most cases a mature girl has her place among girls of her age. The same is true with a mature boy. To cross the line, unless it is before marriage when both girls and boys can mix, may be seen as a disrespectful act. The boys and girls can mix freely before marriage, but tradition demands that they observe some form of discretion when they are in the presence of older persons.

Spatial distance is required for interactions between in-laws. Whether in the household or outside, a spouse shows respect to the in-laws by keeping a certain spatial distance from them. It is not uncommon, in rural areas in particular, to find cases in which a *suriki/sarakuwa* (male/female in-law) changes the direction of his/her route to avoid meeting his/her *surukai* (son-in-law), especially if he/she is the first born son or daughter. But this kind of practice is changing even in rural areas.

In cities the change is even more apparent. For example, a son-in-law may shake hands with his father-in-law, and a daughter-in-law does not have to worry about avoiding her parents-in-law because usually they do not live in the same house. In some cases, the change is due to social and economic imperatives. Economic status may play a role even in rural areas in the event that a son-in-law is richer than his parents-in-law. In this situation, the code of respect may be reversed in favor of the rich and the spatial distance may be just a formality. Even age becomes less relevant since the son has the power of money.

Conclusion

These examples of Hausa greetings, spatial distance, and their varied use demonstrate the difficulties inherent in a "seeing is believing" point of view; seeing does not hear the "unsaid," the variables found in differing contexts. It follows that from a semiotic perspective, and from the point of view of semantic anthropologists such as Salmond, these different forms of social texts or signs are difficult to read and interpret without the help of the actors themselves. In this epistemological space, as Milton calls it, "Those (contexts) from which we derive the meanings, should be defined by the actors; they should be the contexts in which the phenomena concerned are meaningful to them" (1982:262).

In conclusion, I suggest that theoretical models such as semiotics influenced by structural anthropology and Salmond's semantic anthropology may have more to gain if they do not claim scientific objectivity. While scientific accuracy may be a good asset, in a situation like the Hausa greetings and address system it can be a liability. This is because most of the events I have described cannot be taken in the same manner a scientist would collect a blood sample and analyze it in a laboratory in order to produce or corroborate a theory.

Paul de Man (1990) has reminded us that the demystifying power of semiology, that is semiotics, is both a strength and a weakness. But by and large he concludes that it is the method rather than the substance of semiotics that is dangerous. In fact, for him, "The very power of the instrument used (that is the semiotic theory) creates an overconfidence that generates its own set of counter questions. In this case, the questions have to do with the claim of having finally grounded the study of literature in foundations epistemologically strong enough to be called scientific" (1990:184).

Note

¹ Habib A. Daba (1987) and J. A. McIntyre (1980) have dealt with aspects of the same issue from both sociolinguistic and anthropological points of view. They have attempted to show the extent to which address terms, greetings, and other social events can be seen as forms of language that have a significant impact on the social behavior of the participants.

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